

STARTING YOUR SHORT STORY
Questions to help you identify your story
Sonya Gildea

Most writers agree that the best way to discover your story is through the process of writing it. However, at the outset, you may be unsure of what your story is or how to start writing it. This can be daunting. Ask yourself the key creative and technical questions below so as to help you identify your story and to develop your initial ideas, images, characters or scenes into a complete work of fiction.

Getting to know your story

Think of the process of getting to know your story as being much the same as getting to know a person. In other words:

- Take your time
- Ask the right questions
- Listen closely to the answers
- Trust your instincts

Writer's questions

The following questions will help you to clarify and get hold of your ideas, so that you can find a way into your story. They will also help to spark new ideas and fire up your inspiration before and while writing your first draft.

You don't need to figure out all the answers at the beginning and you won't, of course, know your entire story before you write it, but it is very helpful to begin with these questions. See how your answers inform and shape your story. Listen to what your story is starting to tell you.

1. Why do you want to tell this story?

- Why is this story important to you? Why does it inspire you? Why do you think it matters?
- Why do you want to tell this story now?
- What do you want the reader to think and to feel when reading this story? In other words, what do you want the reader to think and to feel about themselves, the people and world you are writing about, (and not you, the writer), when reading this story?

2. What is your story about?

- If you were to describe your story to a good friend in two or three sentences, what would you say it is about?
Write this down in clear, simple language. This will give you a nutshell summary of your story and hopefully an indication of what its main theme is. Give your summary some thought. Perhaps try it out on a trusted friend and listen to their response.
- What two or three changes might make your story stronger? Write these changes down in clear, simple language. Give them some thought.
- Ask yourself again, what do you think your story is about?

3. Who is your story about?

No matter what kind of story you are writing, the people in your stories are very often the most important element.

- Who do you think the main character in your story is? Try to describe them as if you are describing a friend to someone who hasn't met them. Include two striking qualities and something unforgettable.
- Why is this person the main character? Why is the story about them? Why are they interesting to you as a writer?
- Are you telling the story from their point of view? Or perhaps you are telling the story about them?

As you continue to identify your story and the people in it, be open to the possibility that this character might have been leading you toward the person the story is actually about.

4. What happens in your story?

- What series of events take place in the story?
- What happens to your characters and how might they respond to what happens?
- How does one event or character response lead to another event or response?

As you know, what happens in a story can, in simple terms, be considered the plot. Many writers do not have a plot clearly in place when they set out. They rely, instead, on the plot becoming clear while they are writing. Sometimes the plot becomes apparent only after they have completed the first draft. Still, it's a great idea to drop these questions into the landscape of your story early on. Return to them while you write and as you begin to identify what your story is.

- Can you identify a beginning, middle and end?
- How does this affect the order in which you tell your story?

Your story might (but will not always) have a clear and definitive start (exposition), middle (development) and end (conclusion and/or resolve). Think about each of these elements and allow yourself freedom to move the order of scenes and their possibilities around. See what happens. See what you like. See what might work.

5. **Where and when** does the story take place?

- Is your story contemporary? Or is it period or historical fiction? Perhaps it's a story that takes place in the future?
- Why does your story need to be set in this particular era? And what might happen if you were to change it to another time?
- Where does your story take place? Where are your individual scenes set? What locations are you using? Experiment with changing the locations and settings of individual scenes and the overall geography of your story to see what possibilities this may bring.

And finally:

Come back to these fundamental writer's questions as often as you need to while writing the first draft of your story. Listen to your answers, some of which may change as you write. This process will help you to get nearer the story you want to tell and the way in which you most want to tell it.

If in doubt about your answers at any point, try them out. Think your ideas through to their potential conclusion or write up a brief scene or section to see how your ideas work. If they don't work, the reason why they don't is also great information.